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Book Reviews: The Salt Eaters

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Joe," and the romantic sentiment of "Louisiana Pastoral."

Part Seven, "Washington, D. C.," consists of a previously unpublished poem and others that are not generally accessible, including the technically accomplished "Puttin' on Dog," with its infectious dance rhythms.

Part Eight, "Remembrances," is a group of romantic lyrics ranging in style from formal love lyrics and nature poems to the love song "Isaiah to Mandy" and one of the poet's best known blues, "Long Track Blues."

Despite some important omissions and a few textual errors, this volume goes a long way toward giving the reader a comprehensive look at the poetry of Sterling Brown, professor emeritus at Howard University.

The reviewer is director of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard University, and author of "Understanding the New Black Poetry."

The Salt Eaters

By Toni Cade Bambara
Random House, New York
295 pp., \$9.95

Reviewed by Harriet Jackson Scarupa

"I need another sixties. The energy of the seventies just don't do me nuthin." So says one character in "Broken Field Running," a short story in Toni Cade Bambara's collection, "The Sea Birds Are Still Alive."

Through this collection and her previous one, "Gorilla, My Love," Bambara has earned a reputation as one of our premiere writers of short stories, stories that have been likened (by Mari Evans) to "shavins off our Black experience—like chocolate. Bittersweet, that is."

In her first novel, "The Salt Eaters," Bambara takes some of the themes she has explored in her short stories—e.g.,

the contrast between '60s activism and '70s narcissism—and weaves an intricate poetic mesh. The result is at times perplexing, at times exhilarating, but never boring.

The novel opens with a demanding question: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" It is a question posed by Minnie Ransom "in her flouncy dress and hip shoes with flowers peeking out of her turban and smelling like coconut Afro spray." Minnie is a healer, "the real thing," for she is "known to calm fretful babies with a smile or a pinch of the thigh, known to cool out nervous wives who bled all the time and couldn't stand still, known to dissolve hard lumps in the body that the doctors in the county hospital called cancers."

Right now Minnie holds center stage in a room in the Southwest Community Infirmary in a southern town called Claybourne. Before her, on a stool, sits one Velma Henry, a radical community worker who has succumbed to despair. Velma had worn her identities like a string of cowrie beads: activist, nationalist, feminist, environmentalist, wife, mother, daughter, goddaughter, sister, friend, neighbor. . . . But now she has added another bead to her string of identities: attempted suicide. Which is why she is now sitting in the Southwest Community Infirmary, hospital gown covering her body, expression frozen on her face, and listening to Minnie as she demands: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" And again: "Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."

Bambara never tells us *exactly* what led Velma to seek the final solution through slashed wrists and gassed lungs. Instead, she suggests, implies, assumes, hints, evokes, juxtaposing the *pas de deux* of Minnie and Velma in

the healing room against bits and pieces of Velma's life and of those who are connected to it and against snippets of myths that speak of our heritage.

Bambara's is not the tale of one particular woman's neurosis—in the manner of so many of the "women's books" being penned these days. Hers is the tale of all who are committed, still, to making the world a better place at a time when such sentiment almost seems anachronistic and of all those who tend to put everyone else's needs before their own. Does Velma's mental collapse indicate her selfishness, her surrender to self-centeredness? Perhaps. But one of her friends offers another explanation: "Velma's never been the center of her own life before."

Just as she has in her short stories, Bambara proves oh-so-adept at striking the chords of our common experience. To put everyone's life before one's own seems that special weakness of women, especially Black women. To seek escape from relentless pressures in sickness—whether mental or physical—is a temptation we've all experienced. To live amidst decaying ghettos and poisoned air, to watch former "revolutionaries" fritter away their time in "id ego illogical debates" [Bambara's words], to repeatedly confront racism and sexism and militarism and all the other destructive isms, to simply pick up a newspaper with its monotony of horrors, to do all this and more and still manage to hold onto hope—and one's sanity—is no mean feat. Or as the inimitable Minnie puts it, "wholeness is no trifling matter."

Bambara challenges us to confront this reality and then, through Minnie, she throws a second challenge our way: "Decide what you want to do with wholeness."

And so, the chord is struck: wholeness is no trifling matter. Then, too, Bambara's is no trifling talent.

30 Her forte is the vignette. Sometimes her vignettes are poignant as in the scene where a former '60s activist visits Velma, finds her surrounded by pamphlets, posters and the ever-present mimeograph machine, and cries irritably: "And still into the same idealistic nonsense, I gather. . . . You honestly think you can change anything in this country?" Sometimes her vignettes are wickedly witty as when she shares a waiter's dream of marketing "Disposal," "an educational board game for sophisticated of the nuclear age," which challenges players to find novel ways of disposing of radioactive contaminants in the environment. Always her vignettes are telling.

What is most unfortunate is that many readers may be so put off by the intricate, indirect, fragmented way in which the novel is constructed that they will not stick with it long enough to relish its wisdom, its voice and, above all, its healing vision. For salt is Bambara's metaphor for that which is essential for growth and survival. ("The body needs to throw off its excess salt for balance. Too little salt and wounds can't heal.") And "The Salt Eaters" ultimately is the story of one woman—and a people—in search of salt's healing properties. □

The reviewer is staff writer for New Directions magazine.

Throughout, Bambara's dialogue shows how attuned her ear is to the nuances of Black speech. Throughout, her frame of reference attests to her sophistication and her scholarship while her use of poetic language attests to her craftsmanship (craftswomanship? ? ?). Throughout, too, her imagination dazzles—e.g. "ancient mud mothers from the caves" carry their children around in hides; a multi-ethnic singing group calls itself "Seven Sisters of the Grain;" a bus driver speeds his bus past the marshes, dreaming of crashing headlong into them and communing with his dead friend; a storm seems to symbolize both doom and renewal. . . .

It is when confronted with Bambara's organization of all this literary richness that I felt let down. Not only let down, but often baffled. Nothing in "The Salt Eaters" happens directly. Nothing happens in seemingly logical sequence. No transitions ease the way as Bambara shifts from present to past and back again or from one character's viewpoint to another. Instead, one must piece together the story from her enticing fragments. A challenge? Undoubtedly. Exasperating at times? Equally so.